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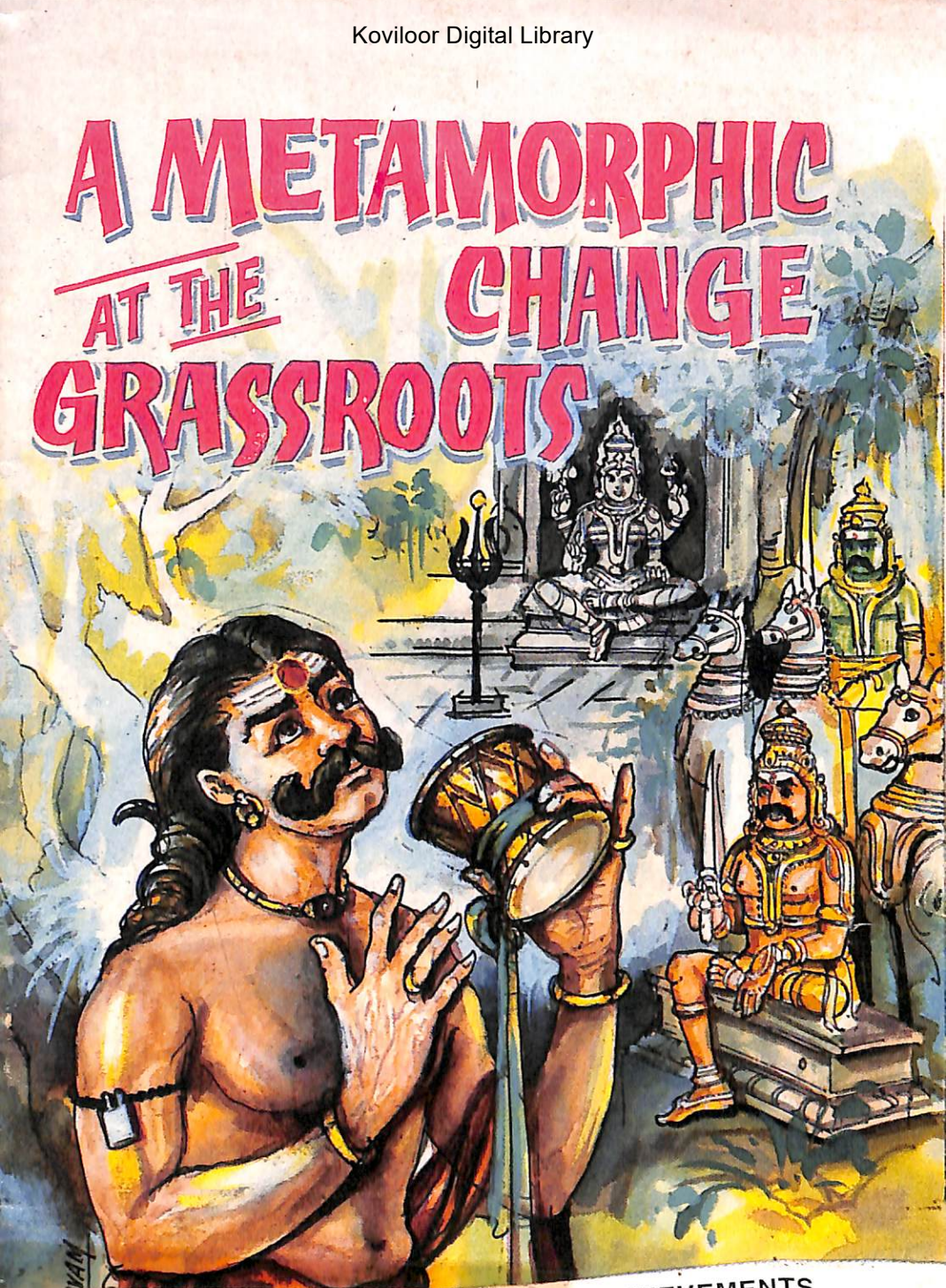
A METAMORPHIC CHANGE AT THE GRASSROOTS



GROWTH & ACHIEVEMENTS
K KOVIL POOJARIGAL PERAVAI
GE TEMPLE ARCHAK'S FORUM)

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A section of audience in the 2nd State Conference.

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KOVILOOR MADALAYAM

ORIGIN - GROWTH AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF GRAMAK KOVIL POOJARIGAL PERAVAI

"Bharat lives in villages" is an old adage. Inspite of fast industrialisation and urbanisation all over the country, still Bharat lives in villages.

There is a Tamil saying that "One should not live in a village where there is no Temple".

Based on this firm conviction people used to build the temple for their worship even before building houses for their habitation in any village.

That is why you find innumerable temples big and small not in thousands but in lakhs - spread all over Tamilnadu.

Every village, nay, even a hamlet has more than one temple dedicated for any one of the mythological Gods we have in Hindu pantheon.

GRAMA DEVATHA TEMPLES :

Apart from the usual temples for Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesa and Karthikeya every village and hamlet has an exclusive temple for the "Grama Devatha".

This Grama Devatha concept though prevalent all over Bharat, Tamilnadu has more temples for Grama Devathas than any other province as it is in the case of other temples also.

"Grama Devatha" is a chosen deity for the entire village safeguarding the interests of the villagers. Hence every family in the village would have an emotional attachment to this deity and the temple.

Many times the "Grama Devatha" may not be housed in well built temple structures. In many villages these deities are being worshipped by the villagers with all devotion and reverence though the deity may be in the form of just a stone pillar or mound of earth.

According to a scholar who has done extensive research on the Grama Devathas of Tamilnadu there are four thousand manifestations of Grama Devathas being worshipped by Hindus in Tamilnadu.

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"Grama Devathas" are nothing but the manifold manifestations of the supreme reality described as "Brahman" in our Upanishads. These manifestations have been nurturing the faith of the illiterate masses.

These manifestations alone appeal to the mindset of the masses who are in the lower rung of the ladder of spiritual progress.

Mass congregational prayers are offered in these temples by the villagers for seeking the grace of Grama Devatha for rains, to control epidemics, for health and wealth of the villagers, for good harvest etc.

These temples have been functioning as community centres, as theatres for folk arts and centres of folk literatures from times immemorial.

VILLAGE TEMPLE POOJARIS:

Every "Grama Devatha" Temple has a Poojari who conducts poojas regularly and also acts as a special messenger of the God in the form of oracles in answering to the prayers of devotees.

Depending upon the personal spiritual discipline of the Poojari, these temples gain importance and thousands of devotees in and around this village throng to these temples.

Poojaris are appointed in the temples as a matter of hereditary right.

These Poojaris as long as they were maintaining their internal and external purity and also strictly adhering to the high spiritual discipline expected of them, they enjoyed public adoration and were respected by one and all. Their advises were sought on matters of individual and collective life of the villagers.

But due to external factors and internal disorders, the roots of our culture were uprooted and the poojari tradition also declined.

Village economy declined steadily due to the onslaughts of foreign rule and the temples lost their lustre. Poojaris who were maintained by the entire village contributions in the form of paddy, milk and pulses slowly were denied these items and they had to take to agricultural labour for sustaining their body and the soul.

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Poojaris economically poor and spiritual bankrupt soon became the laughing stock of the villagers but they still clung to their traditional profession of serving as Poojaris.

These Poojaris who were ignorant of any meaningful forms of worship and their spiritual significance made the entire worship in the temple as a meaningless routine ritual which could not attract the devotees in large numbers.

The atheist propaganda could not be countered by these unlettered and ignorant Poojaris. People became a prey to the onslaughts of Dravidian movements.

The Poojaris even under the most adverse circumstances, withstood the onslaught and with the meagre income on one side and poor knowledge of mantras and methods of worship on the other side sustained the worship in Village Temples without any break. But for their steadfast devotion and continued selfless services, no temple would have survived to this day.

The traditional knowledge of the temple rituals was not handed down to the younger generation.

Poojaris who once enjoyed a high status in the village became despicable persons and objects of ridicule.

TRAINING FOR POOJARIS

Even for the Poojaris who sincerely wanted to learn the mantras and proper modes of worship, there was no institution or centre to teach.

It was at such pitiable situation Vishva Hindu Parishad stepped into this arena and took efforts for training the Poojaris in their temple rituals and connected matters.

Though there are traditional schools for imparting training to Brahmin Archakas, the non-brahmin poojaris who mostly hail from backward communities do not have any institution so far to train in methods of pooja. Hence ours is the first attempt in this direction.

Many eyebrows were raised over the feasibility and the possible outcome of such efforts.

கோவில் பூசை அர்ச்சகர் நலன்
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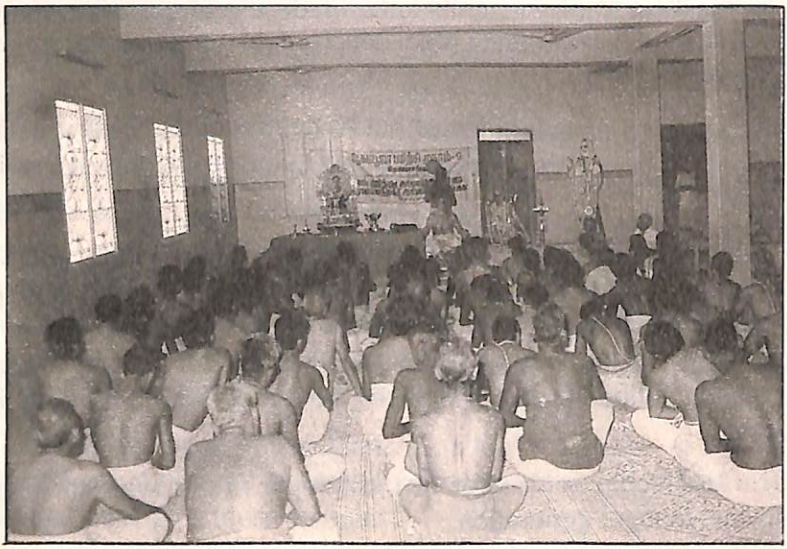
A humble beginning was made in 1990.

In response to the advertisements that appeared in the popular local dailies hundreds of Poojaris awaiting such an opportunity applied for joining the training.



Poojari Training camp at Thennangur.

Course materials were prepared and a residential training programme was planned for 15 days. Poojaris were asked to reach the venue of training at their own expenses.

Boarding and lodging facilities were provided free of cost.

Even in the very first training camp we had 108 Poojaris as trainees.

The initial response we had enthused us for holding similar training camps each for 15 days atleast twice in a year.

During the training period, the teacher and the taught sit together, eat together and sleep together, without bothering about which caste one belongs to.

Till July 1998, sixteen courses of 15 days' duration have been conducted and 1200 Poojaris have undergone the training.

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As a matter of principle, we are not interested in the castes of the applicants. But for statistical purposes, we collect the particulars.

Poojaris from all castes have been trained.

BREAK UP FIGURE IS AS FOLLOWS:

Scheduled Castes	145
Scheduled Tribes	54
Most Backward	73
Backward	670
Forward	258
	1,200

Out of the above, 214 Poojaris have been initiated into Siva Deeksha and 203 Poojaris have been adorned with Yagnopaveetha Dharanam irrespective of their castes.

Many great religious leaders such as His Holiness Sri Jayendra Saraswathi Swamigal, Sri Sankara Vijayendra Saraswathi Swamigal of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam, Thavathiru Santhalinga Ramaswami Adigalar of Perur Adheenam, Thavathiru Ooran Adigal, Thavathiru Swami Nithyananda of Sri Ramakrishna Tapovanam, His Holiness Swami Haridoss Giri of Thennangur have visited our training classes and blessed the Poojaris.

Other important Vishva Hindu Parishad leaders, who have visited the camps are Man. Sri. Ashok Singhal, Man. Sri. Giriraj Kishore, Man. Sri. Sitaram Agarwal, Man. Sri. Dattatreya Kasthure, Man. Sri. Sadananda Kakade, Sri. Baburao Desai, Sri. Y. Raghavalu and Sri B.N. Murthy of Bangalore. Sri. C.Subramaniam, former Governor of Maharashtra also has visited the camp.

CURRICULAM

The curriculam includes Dhyana Sloka of every God in rural temples, Shodasopachara type of worship, stotras and hymns, and Namavalis.

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Siva Deeksha, in the traditional form is being given to these poojaris who aspire for it. Similarly, investiture of Sacred Thread. It is not simply a mere wearing of Upavitha. A simplified form of Sandhya Vandana, matching his ability and practicability, is edited, codified, printed and supplied to each for daily performance.

Poojaris initiated into Siva Deeksha

Special lectures on various aspects of Hindu religion, history, society, Vedas and Prabandams, by scholars in the respective field will be arranged during the course.

Simple way of doing Punyahavachanam, Ganapathi Homam, Pithru Tharpanam, Deepa Pooja, Vivaha, etc., is also being taught to the students with practical demonstrations. The necessity to revive Vrathams, and other traditional customs like Aswatha Pradakshina is also planted in the minds of trainees.

A poojari after completing the training will return to his village as an ardent, confident and militant Hindu. No need to say that he will be an accomplished Poojari thereafter.

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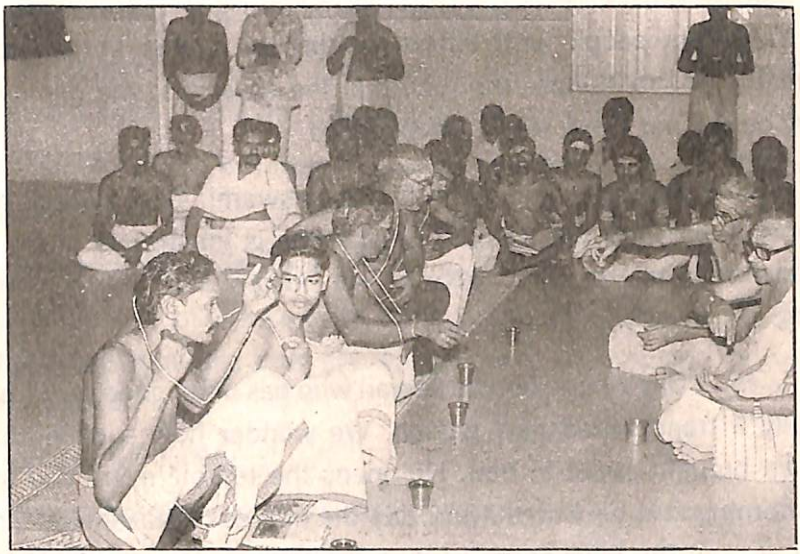
IMPACT OF TRAINING:

Now what is the impact of this training on the Society?

First of all, the trained Poojari will not enter into, or encourse caste-conflicts in his village since he is convinced by and has no an iota of doubt that the Hindu society is one big tree, and the castes are small branches which do not matter at all. He is ready to make a sacrifice for the collective welfare of the Hindu society in his village. Besides being a Poojari, he will be a préacher. He will attend to the needs of, and conduct religious rites in every Hindu family in his village.



Persons adorned with Yagnopaveedha.

The Poojari will chant mantras properly in the temple and these mantras enhance the spiritual vibrations in the temple. Hence people are attracted towards temples and offer Poojas, the Poojaris' income also increases! More devotees; more money!

He will be honoured as a master in religious matters. He will stop the disappearance of customs and rituals which are absolutely necessary for the internal strength of the society.

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But his primary responsibility is in another direction. He will stop proselytisation. The propaganda by other missionaries will be thwarted. The Poojari will take a group of youngsters and question the propagandists. He will explain the unassailable greatness of our religion, agelong history, dependability of our galaxy of Gods and the scientific foundation of our philosophy, customs and rituals, catholicity and universality, adaptability and acceptability.

Did anyone ever notice the welcome change in the mode of worship of a trained Poojari?

Yes. Many people write letters praising the change in the Poojari how nicely he pronounces the mantras, the gayathris, the namavalis which, he did not know some 15 days ago.

A letter from one Smt. Nirmala Rangaswami, Ooty, written to the Principal Acharya of the training programme is illustrative of the total transformation in the personality of the Poojari after undergoing our training.

"..... Our Village Temple Poojari who has undergone your training is totally a transformed new person. We wonder how such a change could be brought about in him. He opens the temple every day in the early morning and he writes every day the details of Nakshatra, Thithi, Month etc., in the blackboard kept in the temple. People have started respecting him verymuch. this year he conducted the Navarathri Pooja, Sahasranama Archana etc., in the temple. Now many people invite him for performing Punyahavachan at their homes"

GARUDA APPEARS:

One trained Poojari offered his services to perform kumbabishekam of a newly constructed temple in a village

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The members of the Renovation Committee, asked him, 'Well, my dear Poojari, if Sivacharyas perform Kumbabishekam, a Garuda used to appear on the sky, go round the tower at the time of pouring of water on the Kalasa at the top of the tower. Can you assure us that a Garuda would appear at the proper time"

"Yes, Sir ...!"

But ho! to his bad luck, when the Lagna was nearing not even a sparrow appeared on the sky!

He was sad. But he did not lose heart.

It flashed in his mind. Oh! Garuda Gayathri was taught to him in the training class. 'Why not pray to Garuda, now?'

'Oh, Garuda! I will repeat your Gayatri for ten times. Kindly give Darshan to all of us.,

Actually, a wonder took place.

At the end of the seventh time, a Garuda appeared on the sky flying over the Gopuram. Everyone was surprised and admired the devotion of the Poojari.

VARUNA JAPA

Tamilnadu was experiencing the hottest sun, a couple of years back. Water became a rare commodity.

The Gramakkovil Poojarigal Peravai convened a meeting of Panchayat Organisers, and conducted a practical class on Varuna Pooja and Japa.

About 300 Poojaris attended the meeting. All of them repeated Varuna Gayathri ten times. How could Varuna Keep quiet?

Just five minutes back the sky was clear; no cloud; not even white clouds!

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Srimad Andavan Swamigal's inaugural address in the Ist State Conference.

A view of audience in the Ist State Conference.

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Sri R. Srihari Provincial President of VHP garlanding the Junior Sankaracharya of Kanchi.

A view of Processionists in the 2nd State Conference.

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But, Varuna was pleased by the prayers of Poojaris. He did shower His blessings.

We had a dew-pour (not a downpour!) for three minutes, immediately after chanting.

No doubt, the mantras, are still efficacious!

Poojaris returned to their villages with confidence. Yes, they could bring rain, at their will.

They did Varuna Pooja and Japa and the villages had showers.

GANESH CHATHURTHI

Similar case is Ganesha Chathurthi.

25,000 copies of Ganesha Pooja, prepared and printed in Tamil, were sent to all the members. The feed-back was very encouraging. Our Poojaris chanted Ganesha Gayathri, performed simple havans with Ganapathi Moola Manthra. (Om Gam Ganapathaya Namaha Swaha).

The villagers were quite astonished at the sudden change of Poojaris!

GRAMAK KOVIL POOJARIGAL PERAVAI

The Poojaris are economically and socially most backward without regular income and lacking in social status.

When Vishva Hindu Parishad came in close contact with the Poojaris, the apalling conditions of Poojaris came to its knowledge. Parishad felt the need for organising the Poojaris and knit them into an organisation to fight for their rights.

The Tamilnadu Government had been paying a monthly pension of Rs.300/- to all the aged Ulemas of Muslim community.

Vishva Hindu Parishad wanted a similar gesture to be extended to Poojaris also.

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STATE LEVEL CONFERENCES:

With a view to bring all the Poojaris under one umbrella and place their demands before the Government, Parishad thought of organising the first State Level Conference of the Poojaris in February 1995 at Tiruchirappalli.

Swami Namanandaji hoisting the flag at the Ist state conference.

5300 Poojaris hailing from almost all Panchayat Unions attended this conference and it was a grand success.

His Holiness Jagadguru Sri Sankara Vijayendra Saraswathi Sankaracharya Swamigal of Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Mutt, His Holiness Srimad Andavan Swamigal of Periyashramam, Srirangam and Srilasri Shanmukha Desika Paramacharya Swamigal of Dharmapura Adheenam participated in the conference and blessed the venture.

This was beginning for the formation of Gramakkovil Poojarigal Peravai.

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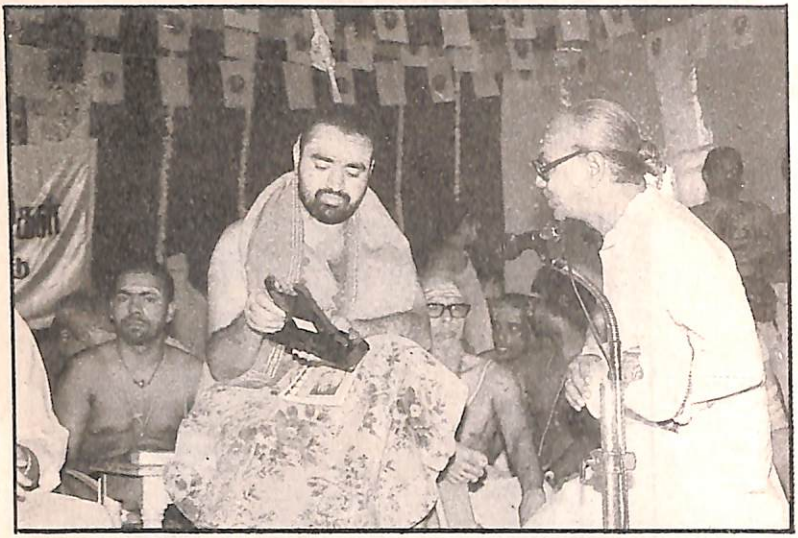

Sri T.S. Kothandaraman with H.H. Sri Sankara Vijayendra Saraswathi Swamigal in the First State Conference

Thavathiru Santhalinga Ramaswami Adigal of Perur Adheenam addressing the Ist state conference.

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Issues relating to the appalling conditions of Poojaris were discussed in the conference. Suitable resolutions were passed and sent to the Government.

Shri Ashok Singhal addressing the Poojaris in the Ist State Conference.

To consolidate the success of this conference, to carry the message and the significance of the unity of poojaris, to explain the resolutions passed at the conference and to bring the entire Poojari Community of Tamilnadu to the fold of the Parishad, 21 District conferences were organised within a span of 6 months.

Thousands of poojaris came to these conferences. Every conference was milestone in the progressive march of Poojari movement in Tamilnadu. Not only male Poojaris but female Poojaris also attended these conferences in great numbers.

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CHIEF MINISTER OF TAMILNADU PARTICIPATES:

Emboldened by the success of the conferences and the massive support extended by Poojaris, an ambitious second State Level Conference was planned in Chennai in March 1996.

2nd State Conference Chief Minister honours the Poojaris.

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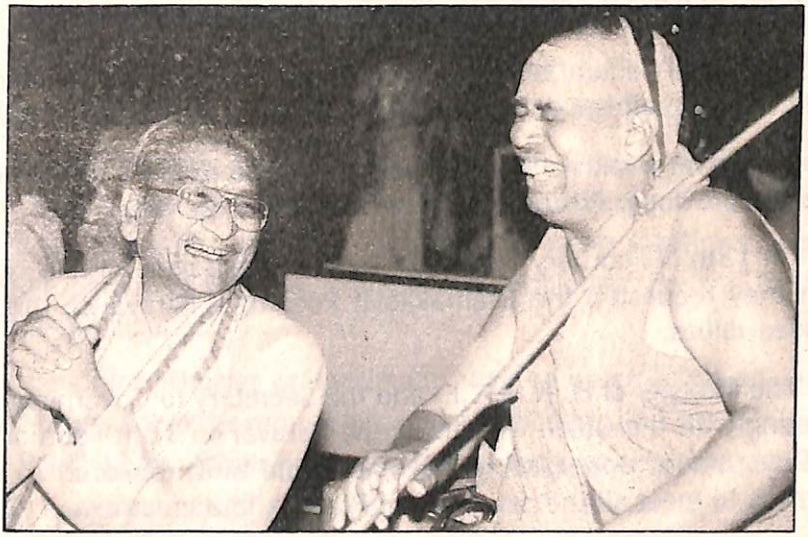
Just prior to this conference Gramakkovil Poojarigal Peravai was registered.

The then Chief Minister of Tamilnadu Selvi J. Jayalalitha was invited to inaugurate the conference.

Chief Minister came to the conference after confirming the vote potentiality of the Poojaris in Tamilnadu and made official announcement accepting all the 9 major demands of Poojaris.



Moment of Ecstacy. Shri Ashok Singhal and H.H. Sri Jayendra Saraswathi Swamigal at the 2nd State Conference.

This was flashed in all newspapers prominently.

His Holiness Shankaracharya Shri Jayendra Saraswathi Swamigal and Shri Sankara Vijayendra Saraswathi Swamigal participated in the conference and blessed the Poojaris.

PENSION FOR POOJARIS

After the elections to the State Assembly in May 1996, new Government was formed in June and Poojarigal Peravai submitted a letter to the new Chief Minister Shri. M. Karunanidhi reiterating its demands and sought an interview with him.

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Though the Chief Minister did not grant an interview inspite of several efforts, he announced during the budget session of the Assembly in July that 1500 aged Gramakkovil Poojaris would be given Rs. 500 each per month as pension.

Though this announcement was made in July, no orders were issued till September 1996.

Only in September orders were passed. But no concrete step was taken further till October end. The Government moved only in snail speed.

Hence the General Body of Gramakkovil Poojarigal Peravai decided to hold rallies in all the district headquarters on 17th February '97

In all over a lakh of Poojaris were expected to join these rallies in the whole province. Arrangements we made in a big way.

On 13th of February 1997 the Government issued a Press Note in which they requested the Gramakkovil Poojarigal Peravai to drop the proposed rallies.

The Minister of H. R. & C.E. and the Secretary to Government had a meeting with the Office Bearers of the Peravai on 16th February'97 The Government appeared to be reasonable and appeared to show eagerness to meet all the demands of Poojaris to a great extent.

This gesture of the Government had almost vindicated the justness of the demands of poor dalit Poojaris and also clearly demonstrated the might of the Poojaris.

But the Government did not keep up their words.

Again the Government moved only in snail's pace.

In the month of December out of the promised number of 1500 Poojaris only 622 Poojaris were sanctioned pension.

Only one good sign was that the Government has nominated one of the members of the Poojarigal Peravai in the Sanction Committee for sanctioning pension to Poojaris.

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POOJARI VOTE BANK

The efforts of the Peravai to make the Government accept their just demands would continue.

The Poojaris are slowly emerging as a formidable Hindu force in future to reckon with by any ruling party in Tamilnadu.

According to our calculations, there are six lakh Poojaris in Tamilnadu and their voting strength cannot be ignored. Every Poojari could easily influence atleast 25 voters to vote according to his dictates.

This was amply demonstrated in the Lok Sabha elections held in March 1998. One of the vital factors for the unexpected resounding success of the BJP - AIADMK combine in these elections was the campaign carried out by the Gramak kovil Poojarigal Peravai to defeat the DMK led alliance.

The Chief Minister of Tamilnadu was so much annoyed by this virulent campaign in the remote villages of Tamilnadu and accused Vishva Hindu Parishad for mobilising the Poojaris in large number and converting them as Karyakarthas of Vishva Hindu Parishad. He had said that nearly 80% of Village Temple Poojaris spread all over Tamilnadu had become workers of Vishva Hindu Parishad.

The Work of Gramakkovil Poojarigal Peravai is increasing day by day. Every day a hundred applications are being received to become members. The Peravai can proudly say that it has in its records 25,000 Poojaris as members. The Peravai has its organisers in 25,000 villages.

The services of Peravai is going on and on, with the blessings of Grama Devathas. The Peravai has a mission to revitalise our Dharma at the grass root level. Success is sure.

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DETAILS OF TEMPLE POOJARIS TRAINING CAMPS

S. No.	PLACE	Date	Total Trainees			Total
01	Thirupparaithurai	22.01.90 to 05.02.90	108	18	15	108
02	Thirupparaithurai	06.03.91 to 20.03.91	132	21	22	240
03	Thirupparaithurai	10.11.91 to 24.11.91	126	24	18	366
04	Thirupparaithurai	14.05.92 to 28.05.92	123	15	32	489
05	Thennangur	05.02.92 to 18.02.93	50	10	3 5	39
06	Thennangur	03.09.93 to 17.09.93	71	13	12	610
07	Thennangur	11.03.94 to 25.03.94	82	21	12	692
08	Thirupparaithurai (Higher Secondary)	30.08.94 to 04.09.94	50	--	--	748
09	Thennangur	20.03.95 to 03.04.95	81	15	21	829
10	Thennangur	25.03.96 to 08.04.96	126	29	23	955
11	Thirupparaithurai	27.11.96 to 11.12.96	33	10	11	988
12	Thennangur	26.03.97 to 09.04.97	52	15	14	1040
13	K.Palada (Nilgiris)	03.05.97 to 09.05.97	46	--	--	1086
14	Thennangur	08.09.97 to 22.09.97	37	06	06	1123
15	K.Palada	21.05.98 to 29.05.98	19	--	--	1142
16	Thennangur	10.07.98 to 21.07.98	39	17	14	1181

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DETAILS OF THE DISTRICT CONFERENCES

Sl. No.	Name of the District	Place	Date	No.of Poojaris Attended
01	Chengai South	Madurantagam	30.4.95	690
02	Chengai North	Tiruvallur	01.5.95	710
03	Vellore	Vellore	06.5.95	926
04	Trichy East	Jayamkondam	21.5.95	1,780
05	Kallakkurichy	Kallakurichy	04.6.95	2,030
06	Thiruvannamalai	Thiruvannamalai	05.6.95	1,980
07	Namakkal	Komarapalayam	06.6.95	1,665
08	Pudukkottai	Pudukkottai	14.6.95	1,979
09	Vaigai	Theni	15.6.95	925
10	Thanjavur	Thiruvaiyaru	17.6.95	975
11	Pasumpon	Sivagangai	22.6.95	2,095
12	Thiruvarur	Thiruvarur	24.6.95	2,050
13	Trichy West	Manapparai	15.7.95	2,183
14	Erode	Erode	23.7.95	2,139
15	Dindigul	Dindigul	05.8.95	2,265
16	Trichy North	Karur	05.8.95	2,169
17	Kanyakumari	Nagercoil	12.8.95	2,084
18	Dharmapuri	Dharmapuri	14.8.95	2,063
19	Coimbatore	Udumalaipet	19.8.98	2,293
				33,001

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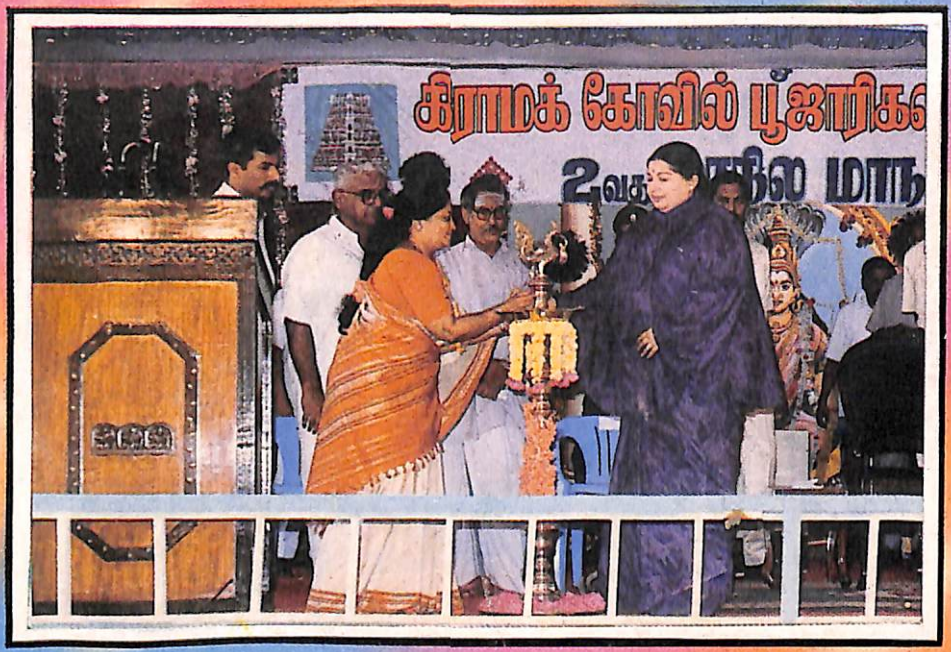

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